

THOMAS MORRIS CHESTER BACKGROUND

Born in 1834 to African American restaurateurs George and Jane Chester in a small apartment above the family restaurant at Third and Market Streets, which also served as a stop on the Underground Railroad, Thomas Morris Chester distinguished himself early by becoming one of the city's first African Americans to go on to college. Chester attended the all-black Avery College in Pittsburgh, which was a focal point for the fledgling back-to-Africa movement that was growing in the pre-Civil War era. Chester left the U.S. for Monrovia, Liberia in 1854, where he continued his secondary education at Alexandria High School. He completed his college education at the prestigious Thetford Academy in Vermont, graduating with second honors in his class.

Chester returned to Liberia after graduating college to found *The Star of Liberia* newspaper, and he also began what would become a lifelong career of educating African Americans. He returned to the U.S. upon the death of his father in 1859, and with the advent of the Civil War, spent two years lecturing across the North about abolition and the importance of black pride and self-respect. He was an early recruiter for the U.S. Colored Troops, and was largely responsible for the formation of the Massachusetts 54th and 55th Regiments, which were immortalized in the Oscar-winning film "Glory".

Although he refused to enlist in the military because Blacks were not permitted to rise above the rank of Sergeant, Chester's leadership and skill were nonetheless considered vitally important to the North's war effort, and he was subsequently given the rank of Captain in the U.S. Army, becoming the first African American in history to be given the elevated rank. Chester was instrumental in forming two companies of U.S. Colored Troops in Harrisburg to defend the city from the advancing Army of Northern Virginia, which subsequently stalled at Gettysburg.

Chester also distinguished himself by becoming the first African American war correspondent, writing for the established *Philadelphia Press*. His were the earliest reports to be issued on the Fall of Richmond, Virginia, which he wrote while seated in the Speaker's Chair in the hastily-vacated Confederate Congress.

After the war Chester further distinguished himself as an international diplomat, becoming the first African American to journey to London, Paris, Berlin, St. Petersburg, Denmark, Sweden and Saxon. He eventually settled in London and studied law at the Middle Temple Inn. In 1870 he became the first black barrister in England and, following his return to America, was also admitted to the Pennsylvania and District of Columbia bars to practice law. He was the first African American attorney to practice law before both bodies' Supreme Courts.

Chester died in Harrisburg in 1892 and is buried in the historic Lincoln Cemetery in nearby Penbrook, PA.